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ABSTRACT

This is a report on the Los Angeles Transfer and Retention of Urban Community College Students (TRUCCS) Project, which tracks approximately 5,000 community college students from nine campuses of the Los Angeles Community College District in order to gather information on retention and persistence. The project also investigates urban community college student patterns of reverse transfer, remediation, and social integration. The report indicates that the student ethnic and age diversity in the TRUCCS project reflects the total ethnic and age diversity of the Los Angeles Community College District, with Hispanic and African-American students representing a majority of the total enrollment. The report also shows that many students in the TRUCCS program had good grades in high school, so there were other reasons why these students had to start at community colleges. Approximately 88% of the TRUCCS students aspired to earn a bachelor's degree or higher, and only 22% defined themselves as being "only a student." Most TRUCCS students are employed full- or part-time, and approximately 15% indicated that they were also parents. Future findings of the project may assist policymakers in making changes to better help these students reach their educational goals. (MKF)

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Research on Urban Community College Transfer and Retention: The Los Angeles TRUCCS Project

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The California Community Colleges (CCC) enroll more than 60% of the state's 1,900,099 undergraduates in the nation's largest network of public two-year institutions (Chronicle of Higher Education, Almanac, 1999-2000). Long touted for their service to non-traditional students (i.e., students of color, older, employed, parents), the California Community Colleges continue to search for new methods to increase retention and transfer for the multiple types of students who enroll with high aspirations and goals. Despite the efforts of many, the fact remains that insufficient numbers of CCC students will make the transition to four-year colleges and universities. This historic and well-documented problem (Astin, 1982; (Cohen & Brawer, 1996a; Rendon & Nora, 1988a, 1988b Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) does not show signs of abatement.

The result of years of accumulated evidence has led many critics to accuse community colleges of failure to deliver on the promise of educational opportunity, especially for minority and low-income students (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Pincus, 1980; Zwerling, 1976). The research community is not alone in sounding loud alarms as scathing reports have emanated from multiple directions. For example, the Little Hoover Commission's scathing report *Open Doors and Open Minds: Improving Access and Quality in California's Community Colleges* pointed squarely at poor teaching, inflexible scheduling that created convenience for faculty at the expense of

students, a system that promotes course enrollment over course completion, and a lack of state oversight. Despite the critics, many community college professionals are dedicated to improving student outcomes.

The Transfer and Retention of Urban Community College Students Project: (TRUCCS)

In 1999, the U. S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement awarded a Field Initiated Studies grant to the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California (USC). The $1.1 million grant to be conducted through 2003 is directed by the Chair of the Community College Leadership Program, Dr. Linda Serra Hagedorn. Co-principal investigators at USC are Drs. Bill Maxwell, Estela Mara Bensimon, and Reynaldo Baca. Dr. Linda J. Sax from UCLA is also a co-principal investigator. The project, entitled Transfer and Retention of Urban Community College Students (TRUCCS), is in its second year of following 5,000 community college students from the 9 campuses of the Los Angeles Community College District. The study is charged with the investigation of the factors (both organizational and individual) that promote retention and persistence of urban community college students. In addition, the project will address issues of remediation, patterns of reverse transfer, social integration, and course taking patterns. The diversity of the Los Angeles Community College District will allow multiple comparisons by different groups of students (ethnic, age, SES, etc.).

The project collects multiple types of data at staggered points in the subject's educational lives. The project began with the development of a new 47-item questionnaire to reflect the community college experience. The instrument was designed for a district where only 43 percent of students are native English speakers. The ethnicity

question had 22 choices plus a write-in just in case a respondent couldn't find a suitable category. In addition, there were other items pertaining to language ability and usage. After a pilot study and subsequent fine-tuning, the final instrument was administered during the Spring 2001 semester to 5,000 students across 241 classrooms.

In the summer of 2001, transcript data were collected for all students who signed the consent forms (96% of the sample). In the fall of 2002, focus group interviews were conducted with students, faculty, and administrators across the district. A follow-up questionnaire is posted on the Internet for a follow-up with the original students. The research team hopes to have located and persuaded at least 50% of the original sample to update their information and answer a series of questions about the past year's experiences.

Other unique aspects of the project include the sampling design that included stratification by remedial and standard courses, learning communities, vocational, and gateway courses. The sample was designed for hypotheses about the effect of various college features on retention and transfer. Since the emphasis was thus on explanation rather than description, neither random sampling nor random assignment were feasible for these conceptual objectives. Instead, the sampling was characteristic of quasi-experimental research. Rather than seeking external validity, the focus was on the internal validity of the design. Thus, the sampling plan maximized variation in the independent variables in the sample relative to the hypotheses to allow the researchers to make internally valid comparisons of sub-groups.

To clarify the nature of the sample we obtained, we compared the sample to the entire Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) population on a number of

factors. Figure 1 provides a comparison by ethnicity of the TRUCCS sample and the LACCD population. The sample obtained adequate numbers of each of four main categories.

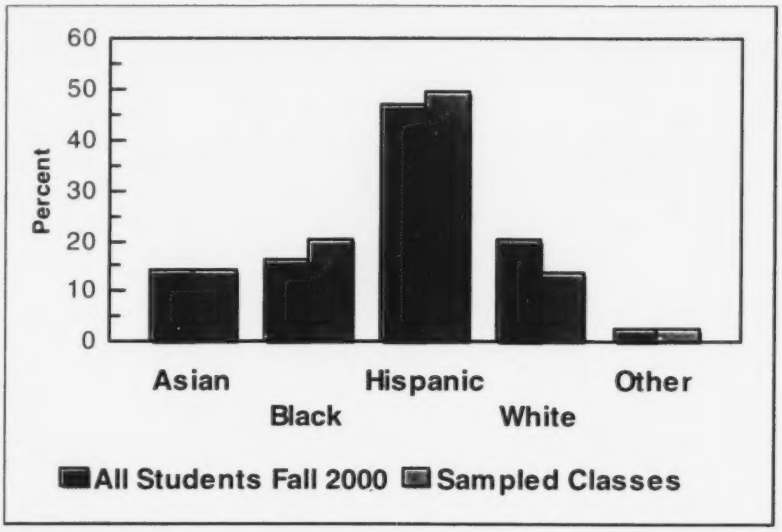
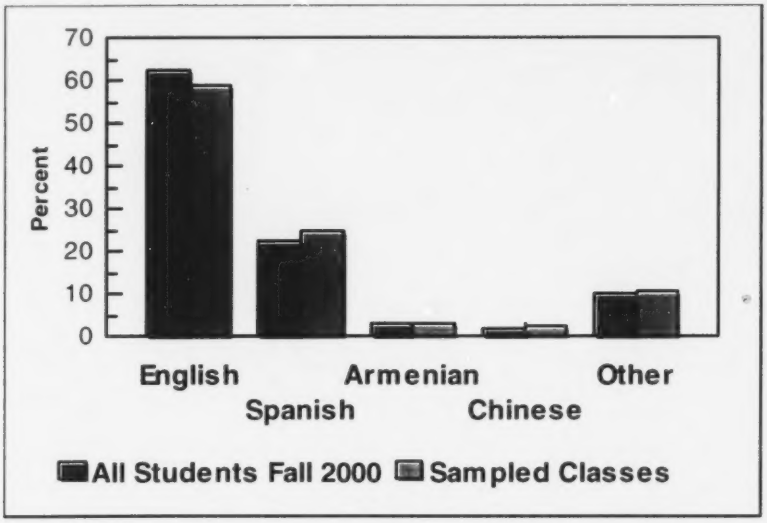


Figure 1. Ethnic Comparison of TRUCCS sample to all students in the Los Angeles District.

Diversity and representation can be measured in various ways. To be sure that TRUCCS accurately and appropriately presents the diversity of the LACCD, a second comparison was made by the reported primary language reported by the students. Figure 2 presents the comparison. Though the sample did obtain slightly greater language diversity than occurs in the population, the numbers were modest for students from many specific languages.

Figure 2. Comparison of TRUCCS Sample with LACCD Population by Primary Language



A final comparison of the TRUCCS sample with the LACCD population was made on the basis of student age. Unlike traditional college or university students, many community college students are older adults. Thus, diversity can also be defined by student age. Figure 3 provides the evidence of representation of all age groups. However, TRUCCS intentionally over-sampled the younger students and under-sampled the older. The sampling plan was devised to obtain an adequate number of transfer level classrooms that would allow the researchers to follow transfer students. Since older students are less represented among those who transfer, it is reasonable to expect that older students would have less representation in the TRUCCS sampling.

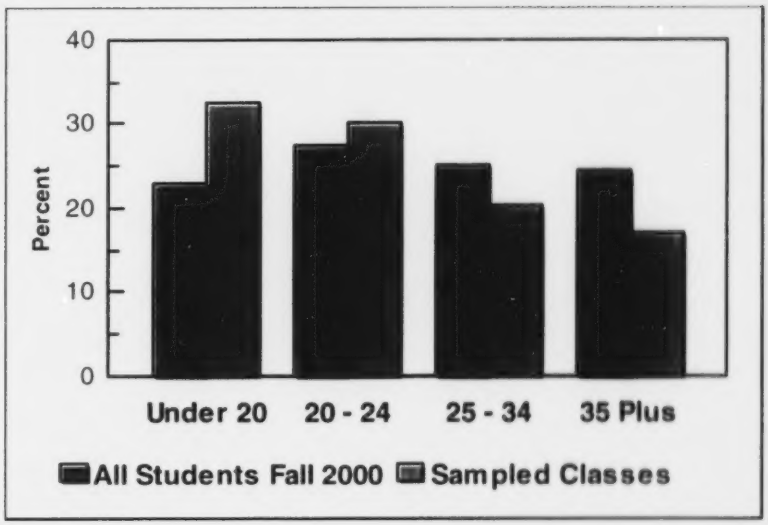


Figure 3. Comparison by student age of the TRUCCS sample and the LACCD Population

Our initial quest was to understand various aspects of our sample. Thus, we examined various student responses. Similar to other urban districts, the LACCD students do not fit traditional descriptions; the majority of the TRUCCS sample (57%) have a native language other than English, the modal parent education is eighth grade or less (20% for mothers; 17.5% for fathers), and 68.7% are employed at least part time (with another 16.5% reporting they are looking for work).

But even amongst this non-traditional group, our data indicated that urban community college students may be even more non-traditional than originally expected. For example, we were not prepared for the large number of students who had previously attended other higher education institutions. We learned that the majority of students (58.2%) reported attendance at another college or university prior to their present

LACCD enrollment, with 12.7% attending two or more institutions. Further, 29.9% of the students reported having earned a prior degree or certificate. Table 2 breaks down the responses by degree type and indicates if the degree was domestic or foreign. Some students reported the receipt of more than one previous degree (thus the sum of the percentages in Table 2 add to more than 29.9%).

	U.S. Degree	Foreign Degree
Certificate	14.0%	5.0%
Associate Degree	8.0%	4.3%
Bachelor Degree	2.6%	3.3%
Graduate degree	1.8%	1.4%

Table 2. Percentages of the TRUCCS Sample with Previous Degrees (Domestic or Foreign)

Finally, we learned that 9.4% of the students reported currently attending more than one institution (see Table 3), and 21% plan to attend more than one college in the next academic year.

	Percentage of TRUCCS Sample
Attending another community college	5%
Attending a 4-year college/university	2.7%
Attending high school	2.7%
Attending a vocational or trade school	2.6%
Attending an adult school	2.9%

Table 3. Proportion of the TRUCCS Sample Enrolled in More than one Educational Institution.

The TRUCCS sample also provides the data to counter some of the preconceived notions of community college students. For one, certainly not all students who attend a

community college do so because they are academically not prepared for a university or could not be admitted by a more prestigious institution. Figure 4 is a graph of the reported high school grade point averages of the TRUCCS sample. Although there are some students who reported poor grades, there are a large proportion of students with grades of "B" or better.

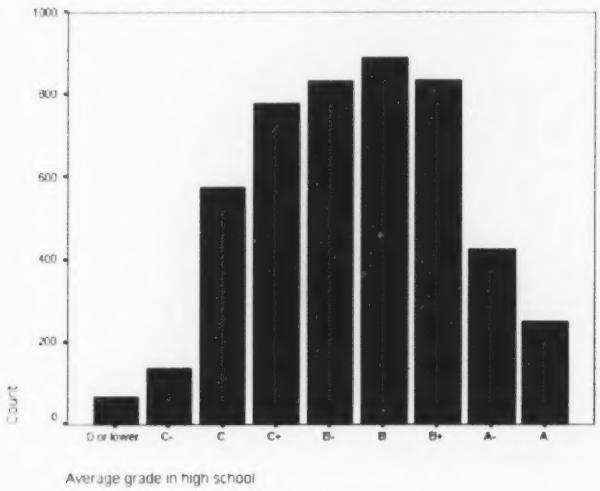


Figure 4. Average Reported Grade in High School of the TRUCCS Sample

Other indications that many students are college-ready can be seen in Table 4 that provides the proportion of the TRUCCS sample that has reported taking various courses in mathematics and science. Certainly a comparison with a research university would reveal that a much larger proportion of students had strong backgrounds in college preparatory courses, but the fact remains that many students who attend a community college do so by choice, and not by academic necessity.

Course	Proportion of the TRUCCS sample
Trigonometry	17.2%
Pre-Calculus	11.6%
Calculus	8.0%
Biology	60.6%
Chemistry	37.3%
Physics	20.3%

Table 4. Proportion of the TRUCCS Sample Reporting Completion of College Level (Level or Preparation?) Courses

TRUCCS also provides evidence that urban community college students have high aspirations. Responding to the question "if there were no obstacles, what is the highest academic degree you would like to attain in your lifetime?" revealed that 87.5% aspire to a bachelor's degree or beyond while 26.7% aspired to the doctoral degree. Figure 5 provides a graph of student responses.

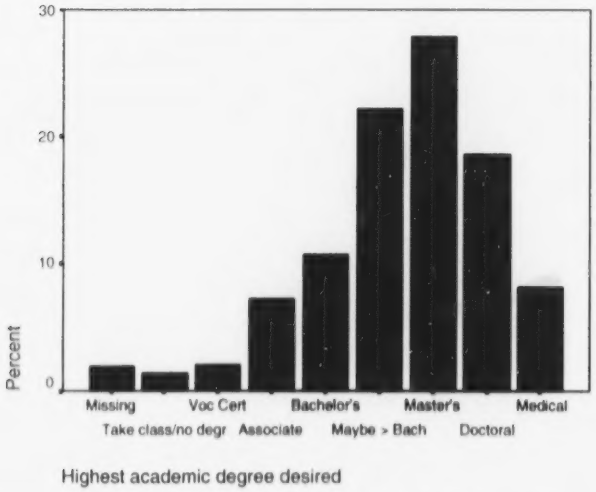


Figure 5. Highest Academic Degree Desired by the TRUCCS Sample

A final aspect of the TRUCCS sample defines the way the students see themselves. Figure 6 indicated the proportion of students who see themselves primarily

as a student who is employed, an employee who is going to college, a parent who is going to college, or solely as a student. Note that only 22% of the TRUCCS sample define themselves solely as a student. The vast majority led complicated lives and balance their work and/or parenthood with their educational pursuits.

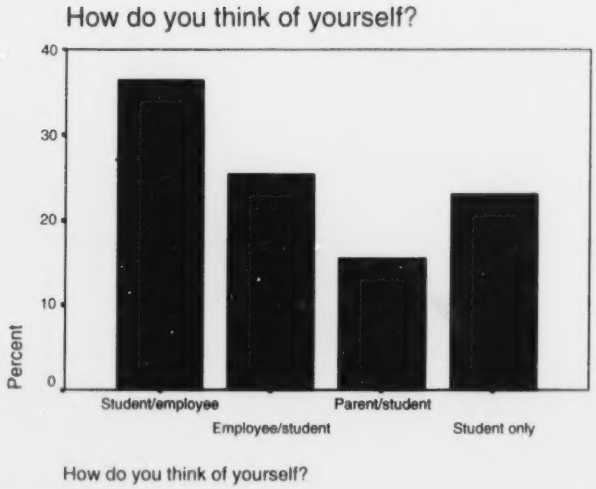


Figure 6. Self Classifications of Student Role

Conclusion

The TRUCCS project is a positive step towards the identification of the factors that promote success among urban community college students. The initial results reported above indicate a great diversity of kinds of students and academic careers in urban community colleges. As course taking and retention data are recorded, analysis can assist policymakers to take the steps to assist more students to reach their goals.